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AUTHOR Lukenbill, Jeffrey D.
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ABSTRACT

An overview is provided of recent efforts to review and redefine the associate degree, with special focus on a workshop sponsored by the Center for the Study of Community Colleges (CSCC) and the Miami-Dade Community College District (MDCCD) which attempted to sharpen the focus of the inquiry into the definition of the associate degree. First, changes that have taken place in community college associate degree programs are summarized, and the need for a comprehensive definition of the associate degree is stressed. Next, issues that are important to the formulation of such a definition are discussed, including the different types of associate degrees granted; the place of remedial/developmental education; the level of generalization/specialization of the degree; and the extent to which the associate degree curriculum should be prescribed or left up to student choice among courses. While acknowledging the difficulty of establishing a comprehensive definition of the associate degree, it is asserted that the associate degree should be defined in terms of student competency rather than credits earned. The next section of the bulletin focuses on the MDCCD/CSCC workshop, providing a brief summary of the keynote presentation by Robert McCabe; an enumeration of the major questions to be addressed in defining the degree; and the different approaches taken by various institutions in curriculum development, competency articulation, and student assessment. (HB)

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DEFINING THE ASSOCIATE DEGREE

CSCC BULLETIN, ISSUE 10, 1984

Prepared by Jeffrey D. Lukenbill
Dean of Academic Affairs
Miami-Dade Community College

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BULLETIN

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Defining the Associate Degree

This issue of the **Bulletin** *was prepared by Jeffrey D. Lukenbill, Dean of Academic Affairs, Miami-Dade Community College.*

During the late 1970s and early 1980s a number of studies and research reports focused on the Associate Degree. Community colleges across the country began to review their degree requirements and to implement procedures that significantly altered their degree programs. Because of the serious problem of enrolling students who are deficient in basic skills, many colleges introduced new placement testing programs and required developmental courses. Standards of academic progress were reintroduced or strengthened. Some community colleges reviewed their curriculum in order to clarify the role of general education in all Associate Degrees. Renewed emphasis was given to academic advisement and career counseling. Interest in honors programs spread. All of these changes had definite impact on both the community colleges' understanding of the degree and their requirements for awarding it.

A summary of these developments, "Defining the Associate Degree" (February 17, 1983) was prepared by the ERIC Clearinghouse for Junior Colleges. This bibliography cites the following: data on Associate Degrees awarded between 1970 and 1980, a longitudinal study of Associate in Arts degrees awarded at the Los Angeles City College between 1964-1980, a list of performance outcomes for the A.A. degree, several studies of general education programs in Associate Degrees, and proposed standards for awarding the different Associate Degrees.

In addition to these activities, two major studies of the postsecondary degree have been done. Under the sponsorship of the Association of American Colleges, eleven colleges and universities participated in a project to study the Baccalaureate Degree. Maricopa County Community College District represented community colleges in this project. Shortly after the A.A.C. project was underway, the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges undertook a similar project to study the Associate Degree. The National Task Force to redefine the Associate Degree, under the direction of Leslie Koltai, Chancellor of the Los Angeles Community College District, analyzed the Associate Degree in order to clarify its function and to recommend ways of strengthening the degree. The National Task Force to Redefine the Associate Degree presented a preliminary report at the annual meeting of AACJC in April, 1983. A final report from the A.A.C. project will be developed during a week long conference in June, 1984.

Towards a Comprehensive Definition

A thorough and comprehensive definition of the Associate Degree is now warranted. Community colleges seriously need to define their Associate Degrees on the basis of student outcomes and program goals, not just on the number of credits earned. Legislatures and boards of education in several states have adopted degree requirements that virtually define the Associate Degree for the community colleges. To maintain strong degree programs that are understood and respected by both educational areas and the public, community colleges must define for themselves and their students exactly what constitutes the essence of these degrees.

Important Issues

Several community colleges have initiated excellent work related to defining the Associate Degree with greater exactitude. Perhaps most of these colleges did not perceive their efforts so broadly as defining the degree, but in specifying degree components they

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were moving to new understandings of the degree itself. An excellent example is the revision of general education programs initiated by community colleges during the last decade. These new general education programs are defined not so much by the number of general education credits required, but more by the general education outcomes students need to demonstrate. Such efforts should be extended to all areas of the Associate Degree. The following issues are but a few that must be addressed to arrive at a comprehensive integrated definition.

Types of Associate Degrees

Community colleges and state departments of education have used slightly different terminology for some of the Associate Degrees. Although the Associate in Arts Degree (A.A.) is consistently designed to prepare students for transfer to upper division study in a college or university, the Associate in Science (A.S.) and Associate in Applied Science (A.A.S.) Degrees vary among states. Some states do not award an Associate in Applied Science. For them, the Associate in Science is an occupational or technical degree not specifically designed for transfer. In contrast, states that offer both of these degrees typically consider the Associate in Science to be another transfer degree while the Associate in Applied Science degree is the non-transfer occupational or technical degree. Two other degrees, the Associate in General Studies (A.G.S.) and the Associate in Occupational Studies (A.O.S.), are less common and generally represent non-transfer degrees that offer students wide choices and do not have specific program requirements. As the Associate Degree gains recognition and greater respect as a valid and valuable part of American postsecondary education, it would be helpful to use a common set of degree terminology. A better understanding of the nature of each of these degrees might in itself lead to this consistency.

The Associate in Science and Associate in Applied Science Degrees

An emerging important issue regarding the A.S. (in this discussion meaning the occupational/technical degree) and the A.A.S. degrees is the question of their transferability. When community colleges first introduced these degrees they were often described as "terminal" in that they were not designed for transfer to the upper division of a college or university. The goal of the degree was to prepare the student for immediate employment, and traditional general education requirements received relatively minimum attention.

Recent reports indicate that more and more A.S. and A.A.S. graduates do transfer to upper division work. In many cases their transfer is as smooth as that of the A.A. graduates. Given the widely accepted concept of "lifelong learning" that is quickly becoming an accepted part of American life, to define any postsecondary degree as "terminal" is to ignore reality. Thus, if the A.S. and A.A.S. degrees are viewed as one stage in a long-term educational process, these degrees must be reexamined to determine how they can best prepare students for future educational opportunities and what place general education should have in them.

The Associate in General Studies Degree

In many community colleges the A.G.S. degree is awarded to students who complete a specified number of credits, (usually around sixty), sometimes without any other specified requirements except a minimum grade-point average. Although there may be value in giving recognition to students who complete a specified number of courses, community colleges will have a difficult time justifying a degree that is not defined by some academic program. Moreover, if the Associate degree is defined by some student outcomes, how can the A.G.S. degree be included? The conclusion is not that the A.G.S. degree should be abolished, but that community colleges must more clearly define the Associate Degree in general and the A.G.S. in particular.

Remedial/Developmental Courses

The place of developmental programs and remedial courses in the Associate Degree is not clear. Some community colleges count these developmental credits in the total requirements for a degree. Others give no credit at all. The need to define the place of developmental and remedial education in the Associate Degree is urgent. Otherwise, legislatures will soon make these determinations for the colleges.

Generalization vs. Specialization

The renewed interest in general education reflects an increasing concern about the place of specialization in the Associate Degree. Although by definition the A.S. and A.A.S. degree have specialized education and training goals, they are not exempt from discussions about the appropriate balance between general preparation of students for broad career choices and for life in general, and the specific preparation for a particular career or occupation. The fact that an increased number of A.S. and A.A.S. students do transfer to the upper division makes the issue even more important. Nor is the A.A. degree exempt from such consideration; it may refer only to a set of distribution requirements.

A most difficult task in defining the Associate Degree, then, is to determine the appropriate balance between requirements that will ensure that students receive a broad foundation in those areas judged to be essential for an educated citizen, and that specific preparation for an upper division major or for an occupation.

Prescription vs. Choice

An issue that must be addressed by those who establish degree requirements is to what extent the curriculum should be prescribed and to

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what extent students should have choices among courses. Some view the weakness of the A.A. degree to be the amount of choice students have. Paradoxically, they also believe a major weakness of the A.S. and A.A.S. degree to be the excessive specificity of the programs.

Students have so many choices in many A.A. programs that, as a result, the degree has little meaning at all. With the possible exception of those enrolled in science tracks, many students can choose from offerings as diverse as courses in remedial education, student development, English as a Second Language, introductions to various disciplines, social issues, fine arts performances, and physical education. General education requirements that allow students to choose from broad groups of unrelated courses provide no more specificity. The answer is not to require students to identify a major prior to their upper division work, but rather to define the degree in a cohesive manner so that at least part of a student's program includes courses with clear interrelations and courses that provide greater depth than general education introductory courses.

Conversely, many A.S. and A.A.S. programs are too specific, designed to ensure that their students cover every aspect of the career or occupation. Business and industry leaders are the first to point out that it is important for their potential employees to have sound basic skills, have a broad preparation in the career area, be able and willing to learn on the job, be able to work with others, have initiative, and be responsible enough to attend work regularly and punctually. In this age of technology it is impossible to provide training in all of the specifics that will be required for jobs in the future. Indeed, since many employers are prepared to provide that specialized training themselves, the A.S. and A.A.S. degrees should provide the foundation needed for graduates both to get jobs in the career area and to adapt easily to future change in that occupation.

Defining the Degree

How should the Associate Degree be defined? With its different forms and goals, a comprehensive definition will not be easy. One fundamental principle emerges, however: *The Associate Degree should be defined in terms of student competency rather than credits earned.* With their basic skills deficiencies and weak foundations, many students clearly will need more time and more credits to complete the degree. Some programs require more than the traditional sixty credits. To have a strong creditable Associate Degree, it is time to define the degree in terms of what is truly important in any education, the competencies students acquire.

But how are competencies assessed? What does a student need to demonstrate in order to qualify as competent? An evaluation of students based on demonstrated competencies suggests a need for testing of general abilities, not merely a test of classroom learning but a test that measures what students need to know in order to function in society.

Miami-Dade Hosts "Defining the Associate Degree" Workshop

Through its project to promote the liberal arts in community colleges, the Center for the Study of Community Colleges has identified the redefinition of the Associate Degree as a concern of high priority for the 1980's. Accordingly, in spring 1983, the Center and Miami-Dade Community College sponsored a workshop to define the associate degree. The seventy workshop participants, including representatives from Chicago, Dallas, Los Angeles, Maricopa, and St. Louis Community Colleges, reviewed current practices that in part define the current Associate Degree, considered issues to be addressed, and discussed a series of questions intended to sharpen the focus of the inquiry.

Keynote Presentation

"To some extent American education at every level has drifted to an educational program that simply doesn't meet the needs of the country." Beginning with this critical premise, President Robert McCabe of Miami-Dade challenged the workshop participants to confront issues of fundamental concern not only to community colleges but to all of American education. While praising the many excellent accomplishments of these colleges, he noted that in the process of trying to meet other societal demands and requirements in a significantly changing society, the entire educational system developed programs that do not meet America's needs today. Recognizing this condition, the American public considers public education to be generally unsatisfactory.

We in the community colleges must stand fast to help the mass of Americans gain the kinds of competence they need to both contribute to and benefit from society. For McCabe, a basic area of competency is the ability to process information in this merging "Information Age." All students need to be able to locate, read, interpret, apply, analyze, and communicate information.

What characterizes the Associate Degree? McCabe maintains that anyone attaining this degree must possess essential generic academic skills, must have a clear content expectation that provides some breadth, and must have learned a process for learning. Graduates should be able to find and use information, apply data, listen and speak, read and write intelligently and effectively, and develop solutions to problems. In short, the community college graduate should have developed an information process with all of its associated skills.

Some Questions to be Answered

Participants in the Center/Miami-Dade workshop met in groups to address more specific questions about the nature of the Associate Degree. Among the questions discussed were the following:

- What is the purpose of the A.A. degree? - the A.S. or A.A.S. degree?
- What competencies should characterize all graduates?
- What is the optimal balance between general education/liberal arts and program/specialization courses in the A.A. degree? - in the A.S. degree?
- How much freedom should A.A. students have to choose electives? - A.S.or A.A.S. students?
- To what extent should the students'potential to transfer with an A.S. or A.A.S. degree be considered in designing the general education/liberal arts aspects of the degree?
- What is the role of developmental education in the associate degree? Should developmental courses meet degree graduation requirements?
- Is there a role for non-credit or non-course activities in the A.A. degree? In the A.S. or A.A.S. degree?
- Should work or intern experience be required for the A.S. or A.A.S. degree? Could work or intern experience have a place in the A.A. degree?
- Should students be assessed outside of their individual courses as part of their degree requirement? – in the general education/liberal arts areas? in program specific areas?

Approaches

Each participating district has begun to define more clearly what characterizes their graduates. For example, Dallas County Community College's Common Learning Committee has identified new requirements for the Associate Degree, including a general education core, interdisciplinary courses, and increased emphasis on writing. At City Colleges of Chicago a two-tier developmental program has been implemented as well as new general education core requirements. The college has also stressed increased articulation with high schools, with the goal of improving students' preparation for college-level work. St. Louis Community College has emphasized

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communication in its efforts to define the Associate Degree more clearly – communication among the college faculty and with representatives of other schools, colleges, and the community. They have reviewed the place of the liberal arts and interdisciplinary courses in their curriculum. Through numerous task forces, the Maricopa Community Colleges have made significant advances in strengthening their Developmental Education programs, Arts and Sciences, and Occupational Education. Required competencies in these areas have been clearly stated. At Miami-Dade Community College, new developmental requirements, a new general education program, new academic standards, new advisement programs, and a new Honors program have been implemented. The college is also analyzing the role of testing and assessment in changing degree requirements.

Other approaches demand consideration. In the critical area of academic advisement, for example, Arthur M. Cohen, President of the Center for the Study of Community Colleges, proposed a "simulation" approach that would provide simulations of various degree programs and university requirements in order that students could project their experiences if they took a particular pattern of courses or a specific program. Such simulation activities would permit individually prescribed Associate Degrees leading to specific outcomes.

In support of the efforts to redefine the Associate Degree and to strengthen the transfer role, the Center for the Study of Community Colleges has attacked the problem of demonstrating what students in community colleges learn across programs within the colleges and across community colleges nationally. A General Academic Assessment has been developed so that relationships can be established between what students know when they enter the community college, what they know after taking specified courses, and what they know at graduation. Cohorts of students can be identified so that different kinds of analyses can be made. For example, how do students who have taken two or more science courses perform as compared to those who have taken none? Or, how do older students who have worked three or more years compare to students just out of high school? Or, what do students who aspire to careers in the health sciences know in comparison to those who aspire to careers in the arts? The Center is attempting to help community colleges adopt procedures and instruments that will help answer these types of questions in terms of student cohorts. This "value-added" approach will certainly help in the process of redefining the Associate Degree and in providing specific data to legislatures, departments of education, and to the public about the competencies of Associate Degree graduates.

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8118 Math-Sciences Building
Los Angeles, California 90024